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ABSTRACT

This research examined Chickering's psychosocial developmental characteristics of nontraditional aged (25-45) university freshmen and compared these developmental characteristics with those reported for traditional aged (18-24) freshmen to determine if significant differences exist between these groups of students. The Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI), which has been validated as a reliable means of measuring Chickering's psychosocial developmental characteristics with traditional aged students, was used. Results suggest that nontraditional aged students appear to function at a higher level than traditional freshmen on most of the measures, at about the same level on two scales and below traditional aged students on one. Implications and recommendations for colleges and universities are suggested. A list of suggested readings is also included. Additional tables of data are available from the senior author. (Author)

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Developmental Characteristics of Nontraditional Aged Students

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Kansas City, Missouri
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Abstract

This research examined Chickering's psychosocial developmental characteristics of nontraditional aged (25-45) university freshmen and compared these developmental characteristics with those reported for traditional aged (18-24) freshmen to determine if significant differences exist between these groups of students. The Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI), which has been validated as a reliable means of measuring Chickering's psychosocial developmental characteristics with traditional aged students, was used. Results suggest that nontraditional aged students appear to function at a higher level than traditional freshmen on most of the measures, at about the same level on two scales and below traditional aged students on one. Implications and recommendations for colleges and universities are suggested. A list of suggested readings is also included. Additional tables of data are available from the senior author.

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AMERICAN COLLEGE PERSONNEL ASSOCIATION

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Developmental Characteristics of Nontraditional Aged Students

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Introduction

This research looks at the characteristics of psychosocial development for nontraditional aged freshmen students. The term nontraditional college student has been described in many different ways. Often included in this group are single parents regardless of age, stops outs, drops outs, those who did not attend college immediately following graduation from high school, and persons of various ages from 22 and up. Therefore, to describe the population of interest merely as nontraditional did not seem appropriate. Since age was of key importance to the study, nontraditional aged student was defined for this study as those students aged 25 to 45.

This research was based upon theories of psychosocial development. These theories involve descriptions of the developmental tasks associated with different stages in the adult life span. These stages and the tasks associated with them are generally thought to occur in sequential form. The lack of accomplishment of tasks at each stage are believe to have a cumulative effect on a person's ability to complete tasks in future stages.

The research on psychosocial development in college students is based primarily upon studies conducted with traditional aged students. The psychosocial development of nontraditional aged students is a neglected area. The developmental theories relied upon for use with nontraditional aged college students have been those used for traditional aged students or for adults who were not attending college.

These theories may still be of some value, however, because, knowingly or not, whether it is a formal theory, an informal one, some abstraction of a theory, or a synthesis of several theories everyone works from some sort of theoretical frame. More importantly as Robert Rodgers (1989) pointed out "formal theories provide the general and specific criteria for designing physical environments, programs, policies, and services that are appropriate for persons at different developmental levels" (p. 120). Since nontraditional aged students were not included in the studies that produced currently used student development theories, the applicability of these theories to nontraditional aged students needs to be examined. If they are not applicable then further research leading to more suitable theories to use with nontraditional aged students needs to be undertaken.

This study focused on two objectives essential to the understanding of nontraditional aged, 25 to 45 year old, college freshmen. One objective was to identify and describe, in accordance with Chickering's (1969) theory, the psychosocial developmental characteristics of nontraditional aged freshmen. The second objective was to compare these developmental characteristics with those reported for traditional aged freshmen, to ascertain if significant differences exist between these groups of students.

Population and Sample

The population used in this study consisted of degree seeking freshmen students 25 to 45 years of age from two universities located in the central United States. These students were enrolled in a minimum of three credit hours in the 1991-1992 academic year.

Each participating university provided a master list of students who attend their institution, screened to meet the above criteria for participants. A list of random numbers for each university was computer generated and 150 students from each university were randomly selected as the sample. The students selected were sent the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI) (Winston, Miller, & Prince, 1987) to complete and return in pre-addressed, postage paid envelopes.

Instrumentation

The Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (SDTLI) is a revised version of the Student Developmental Task Inventory--second edition by Winston, Miller, and Prince (1979). It is designed for use with traditional aged students within a higher education setting. This instrument was used because it has been validated as an effective instrument to measure Chickering's psychosocial developmental concepts. While it was designed for use with traditional aged students, information in the manual and my conversation with one of the authors supported the SDTLI as an appropriate instrument for use in research with nontraditional aged students.

Items on the Inventory assess student attitudes, behavior, and feelings, taking into account differences in lifestyle, cultural activity, and sexuality issues (Winston & Miller, 1987). The inventory is divided into three developmental tasks, eight developmental subtasks, and three scales. The higher the score on each area the greater the level of achievement in each area the student has reached (See Table 1).

Table 1

Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory Tasks, Subtasks, and Scales Described

Tasks/Subtasks & Scales	Description (High Scores Indicate)
Establishing and Clarifying Purpose	Active educational participation; Career planning knowledge; Appropriate decisions regarding personal life; Participation in cultural activities; Appropriate control of personal obligations.
Educational Involvement	Established educational goals, understanding of known resources, and active participation in college academic life.
Career Planning	Knowledge of the world of work, and personal skills and abilities as they relate to career choices.
Lifestyle Planning	Establishment of life plans that consider personal ethics, values, family planning, and career and educational goals.
Life Management	An ability to meet personal needs without outside assistance.
Cultural Participation	Active participation in a wide variety of cultural activities.
Mature Interpersonal Relationships	Maturity in peer relationships, in relationships with those from other cultures, and in personal autonomy.
Peer Relationships	Peer relationships are based on mutual trust and openness.
Tolerance	Regard for and recognition of those who are racially or culturally different.
Emotional Autonomy	Independence of thought and action.
Academic Autonomy	Ability to reach personal goals and meet personal obligations.
Salubrious Lifestyle	Lifestyle exhibits appropriate health and wellness activity.
Intimacy	Intimate relationships exhibit feelings of mutual respect, honesty, and trust.
Response Bias	Inappropriately completed forms.

Design

The raw scores for nontraditional aged freshmen on the SDTLI tasks, subtasks, and the INT and SL scales were converted to T-Scores for each university, and for the total sample. These scores were then compared to the norms for traditional aged freshmen as listed in the SDTLI manual. A series of *t*-tests was also done to determine the statistical significance of the differences between the two groups, again for both universities and the total sample.

Procedures

Students selected to participate were mailed the SDTLI with three weeks allowed for the return of the inventory. A response rate of 40% was expected from participants at each institution. After three weeks a follow-up letter was sent to those who had not responded requesting that they complete the inventory and return it. A final response rate of 39.3% was achieved for one university and a 40% response rate was reached for the other producing a final total response rate of 39.7%.

Completed inventories were scored according to the instructions in the SDTLI manual. None were rejected based on inappropriate scores on the Response Bias Scale. The scores for each section were totaled and means were calculated.

Statistical Analysis

The statistical analysis was performed for each university, and for the total sample. The scores of the sample for all tasks, subtasks, and the two characteristics scales were converted to T-Scores and compared to the norms established for traditional aged freshmen. The differences between the means on the SDTLI of nontraditional age freshmen and those of traditional aged freshmen were examined for significance by use of *t*-tests. Those areas where *t*-tests had results of $p<.05$ were considered significantly different.

Demographics

Details on the gender, marital status, and racial cultural backgrounds for respondents from both universities and for the total sample are provided in Table 2.

Table 2
Demographic Data for Responders

	University 1		University 2		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Gender						
Female	40	67.80	44	73.33	84	70.59
Male	19	32.20	16	26.67	35	29.41
Marital Status						
Married	34	57.63	39	65.00	73	61.34
No Longer Married	13	22.03	14	23.33	27	22.69
Never Married	12	20.34	7	11.67	19	15.97
Racial/Cultural Background						
Black or Afro-American or African	2	3.40	4	6.67	6	5.04
Hispanic or Mexican American	1	1.69	5	8.33	6	5.04
Oriental or Asian or Pacific Islander	0	0.00	1	1.67	2	1.68
Indian or Native People	0	0.00	2	3.33	1	0.84
White or Caucasian	55	93.22	48	80.00	103	86.56
Any Other	1	1.69	0	0.00	1	0.84

Note: University 1 n=59, University 2 n=60, Total n=119

The youngest one third, those 31 and younger, of the sample made up nearly one half of the responders with 53, 23 (19.33%) were from University 1 and 30 (25.21%) from University 2. The middle third, those 32 through 38, provided the next highest response rate with 44, 25 (21.01%) were from University 1 in this range and 19 (15.97%) from University 2. The oldest third was divided evenly between the two universities at 11 (9.24%) each. See Table 3 for the frequency of responders at each university and the total sample for each age.

Table 3

Age Frequency of Nontraditional Aged Students

Age	University 1 n	University 1 %	University 2 n	University 2 %	Total n	Total %
25	4	6.78	4	6.67	8	6.72
26	3	5.08	4	6.67	7	5.88
27	2	3.39	5	8.33	7	5.88
28	5	8.47	4	6.67	9	7.56
29	3	5.08	1	1.67	4	3.36
30	6	10.17	6	10.00	12	10.08
31	0	0.00	6	10.00	6	5.04
32	3	5.08	5	8.33	8	6.72
33	5	8.47	3	5.00	8	6.72
34	5	8.47	3	5.00	8	6.72
35	5	8.47	1	1.67	6	5.04
36	5	8.47	2	3.33	7	5.88
37	1	1.69	5	8.33	6	5.04
38	1	1.69	0	0.00	1	0.84
39	1	1.69	1	1.67	2	1.68
40	4	6.78	3	5.00	7	5.88
41	0	0.00	2	3.33	2	1.68
42	3	5.08	2	3.33	5	4.20
43	1	1.69	2	3.33	3	2.52
44	2	3.30	0	0.00	2	1.68
45	0	0.00	1	1.67	1	0.84

Note: University 1 n=59, University 2 n=60, Total n=119

Table 4

Means, Standard Deviations, and t-values for Nontraditional Aged Freshmen at University 1 (U-1) and University 2 (U-2) on the Tasks, Subtasks, and Scales

	U-1			U-2			Total		
	Mean	SD	t	Mean	SD	t	Mean	SD	t
PUR	35.51	11.06	-1.99*	35.93	8.80	-2.31*	35.72	9.99	-2.17*
EI	8.51	3.57	-1.66	8.50	2.74	-1.69	8.50	3.18	-2.23*
CP	7.95	4.06	0.30	8.33	3.74	-0.38	8.14	3.90	-0.04
LP	7.02	2.35	-3.49*	7.28	1.83	-4.35*	7.15	2.10	-5.31*
LM	9.41	3.11	-3.99*	9.53	3.05	-4.28*	9.47	3.08	-5.54*
CUP	2.66	1.40	2.46*	2.32	1.45	4.11*	2.49	1.44	4.39*
MIR	22.76	4.87	-7.01*	21.45	4.30	-5.25*	22.10	4.64	-8.25*
TOL	6.75	1.80	-2.84*	6.32	1.69	-1.24	6.53	1.76	-2.73*
PR	10.05	2.42	-6.45*	9.22	2.26	-4.17*	9.63	2.38	-7.74*
EA	5.97	1.69	-7.01*	5.92	1.65	-6.84*	5.94	1.67	-9.62*
AA	6.64	2.46	-6.21*	6.43	2.64	-5.52*	6.54	2.55	-7.93*
SL	5.03	2.68	-1.42	4.32	2.19	0.90	4.66	2.47	-0.28
INT**	14.63	3.35	-4.93*	14.13	3.39	-4.37*	14.37	3.38	-6.18*

* Significantly different at $p<.05$

** University 1 n=49, University 2 n=53, Total n=102 on INT because respondents were directed to omit this section if they had not had an intimate relationship in the past twelve months.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that nontraditional aged freshmen students appear to be functioning at a higher level than traditional aged freshmen on:

- Establishing and Clarifying Purpose (PUR)
  - Educational Involvement (EI)
  - Lifestyle Planning (LP)
  - Life Management (LM)
- Mature Interpersonal Relationships (MIR)
  - Peer Relationships (PR)
  - Tolerance (TOL)
  - Emotional Autonomy (EA)
- Academic Autonomy (AA)
- Intimacy (INT)

Nontraditional aged freshmen students surveyed in this study appear to be functioning at a similar level with traditional aged freshmen on:

- Career Planning (CP)
- Salubrious Lifestyle (SL)

Based on this study nontraditional aged freshmen students appear to be functioning at a lower level than traditional aged freshmen on:

- Cultural Participation

Implications

This study suggests that the differences between nontraditional aged freshmen and traditional aged freshmen may not be as great as had been hypothesized. While differences were found to exist in most areas there are also some similarities between the two groups. Some of the differences appear to be related to age and others to the greater opportunities for exposure to life experiences held by nontraditional aged students. The similarities may be related to the fact that college attendance provides specific growth opportunities that neither group has had an opportunity to access yet.

The nontraditional aged freshmen who took part in this study, when compared to the established norms for traditional aged freshmen appear:

- More motivated to learn;
- More focused on their educational and life goals;
- To have achieved a higher level of autonomy in their educational pursuits;
- More able to meet their academic, social, and family life responsibilities;
- Better able to form mutually beneficial peer relationships;
- More accepting of the racial and cultural differences between themselves and those around them;
- More independent in their decision making;
- More adept at formulating and carrying out academic plans in an independent manner;
- Better able to develop an intimate relationship with another person based on mutual trust and respect;
- To spend less time participating in cultural activities;
- Less motivated to pursue a lifestyle based on accepted practices that promote health and wellness;
- Uncertain about what careers they are most suited for, and what is involved in different careers.

Recommendations

The results of this study indicate that while differences exist between traditional aged and nontraditional aged college freshmen both groups still face similar obstacles in some areas. While age related differences would seem to dictate alternative types of programs for nontraditional aged students this may not be the case. The varied life, and work experiences of nontraditional aged students, while it needs to recognized as a difference, can add to enrichment of the classroom for all students.

Therefore it is recommended that colleges and universities provide nontraditional aged students:

- Opportunities to participate in career planning activities which would allow them to validate career choices or to discover other options.
- Increased availability of cooperative education programs.
- More opportunities to participate in internship experiences.
- Coursework that imparts knowledge about health and wellness.
- Cultural programming that affords more opportunities for nontraditional aged students to include both family and friends and takes into consideration obligations outside their academic life.
- Student life programs, tied to student counseling centers, so that nontraditional age students have an opportunity to assess their current developmental level.
- Academic advising which recognizes the greater levels of educational involvement, personal life control, and academic autonomy of nontraditional aged students by allowing them more flexibility in arranging academic schedules.

Many of these recommendations could be incorporated into an orientation program similar to those found on many campuses today for freshmen. These programs would need to recognize the differences between the two age groups of students, while still recognizing their similarities.

More research needs to conducted on the developmental characteristics of nontraditional aged students. The differences that exist between not only freshmen, but for all class levels of undergraduate students, needs to be explored.

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